

JOHN HORTON

Mexico, The Way of Iran?

DISMAL STORIES

The businessman from California was part owner of a firm in Mexico; the future of Mexico was grim (according to him), and he seemed almost angry as he spoke of the outlook for business in Mexico. Looking somber, he illustrated his point by saying that his partner in Mexico City kept his plane constantly warmed up so that he could leave in a hurry – if it came to that. The businessman seemed to think it might.

This conversation was over drinks in a Washington house in the summer of 1983. The businessman was not a member of the Reagan administration, although he knew Reagan and supported him. His view was not unlike those expressed in the stories of people in the administration who had views on Mexico. His anecdote of the partner and his airplane was unusual. You cannot help wondering: Are the partner and his airplane still there? Is the engine still running? Has the partner gained enough confidence in Mexico to call the hangar to have them shut it down?

To illustrate a body of opinion about Mexico by repeating an anecdote about the gloomy prognosis of one California businessman is entirely suitable. Anecdotes such as his, perhaps this one among them, helped to form the opinions about Mexico of members of the Reagan administration; few people in the administration had direct experience with Mexico. When we want to have an opinion of an unfamiliar situation but do not have the time to try to understand it, we strongly tend to turn to others whose views confirm our own prejudices and preconceptions.

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An anecdote offers a clear, memorable, and simple brief of a complex problem. It may pretend to explain the problem or unlock what is baffling about it. An anecdote may approach the status of opinion but at least it substitutes for a more sophisticated explanation. Inevitably an anecdote is oversimple. That is why it is powerful, whether used as a parable intended to bring home a truth, to illustrate a generality, or to slander someone — these being its common uses. Because of this simplicity, it is easy to work with, and if it strikes us right when we hear it, we will pass it on to others.

Anecdotes have their use in intelligence work: Where there's smoke there's fire. You have to listen to find out what they represent. And that is often less a truth about the situation they purport to explain than a description of a catching turn of mind; a popular picture, a fashionable trend of opinion, or an appeal to the era's prejudice. With interested businessmen trooping through the halls of Reagan administration offices with hair-raising tales of crisis in Mexico, this administration was particularly excited by these anecdotes.

In the first years of the Reagan administration a powerful image of Mexico was of another Iran.* That analogy challenged the comfortable contention that the Mexican establishment had weathered many storms in the past fifty years and that it would pitch and roll through the present gale, coming out at the other side with a few sails blown out, the rigging tattered, leaks sprung in the hull, some of the crew washed overboard, and most of the survivors unhappy, but afloat and sailing. Thus, calling Mexico an Iran was meant to bring up short those who thought Mexico immune to capsizing: the analogy was an invitation to reexamine dusty assumptions about Mexico.

But not only that. When a newly-elected administration comes to Washington, the echo of its campaign propaganda is still ringing in its ears. These days it brings to Washington the colporteurs of the victorious ideology from the research institutes and faculties. They will have furnished the intellectual fuel for the attacks on the policies and actions of the previous administration. From serving on the transition team, these intellectuals may slip into the niches of government where they can try to transplant their ideas from the protection of the cold frame to the uncontrolled climate of the outdoors.

WHO LOST IRAN?

Mexico-as-Iran became not only a challenge to complacency but, to some, a hypothesis for explaining Mexico. The analogy with Iran carries a number

*"Mexico: The Iran Next Door?" appeared in *The San Diego Union* of 5 August 1979. The author, Dr. Constantine Menges, who joined the Reagan administration, had an important influence on administration opinions of Mexico for a period of time.

of meanings beyond similarities between the two countries and the implication of a collapse in Mexico. First, it reminds us (sadly or with glee) of Iran and of the major failure in foreign affairs of the Carter administration. The fault was complacency and it was not Carter's failure or his administration's failure alone. The Department of State was responsible, too; so was the Central Intelligence Agency.

The Reagan administration more readily forgave the CIA for its presumably poor performance than it did State, on the ground that personnel reductions under Carter had led to a lowering of effectiveness at intelligence-gathering by the CIA Directorate of Operations. These reductions were blamed on the Carter administration, although some had taken place before the Carter time.

BUGBEARS

Consider for a moment the reasons for the various prejudices in our society about the CIA, in particular, and intelligence work, in general. They deserve a more careful look than they get even if the question bears indirectly on intelligence work. Why do those who think of themselves as liberals dislike or distrust the CIA to be credal doctrine? Probably because liberals strongly tend to perceive CIA as immoral or an invasion of privacy. Why do conservatives generally like the idea of having an intelligence service? Probably because conservatives strongly tend to perceive CIA as strengthening national security. Why does the far right suspect the worst of the CIA? Why is it a political issue at all?

Ask a CIA veteran and he will come up with what he thinks are the obvious answers. A patient examination of cases might be illuminating, even help to provide relief to the hodgepodge caused by the so-called oversight committees in Congress.

NO MORE IRANS

As noted above, the new administration was not as charitable with excuses for State, a department popularly considered guilty of whatever failing an accuser enjoys pinning on it. And if the Operations Directorate of the CIA was forgiven because it had been crippled in the past, the analytical side of the CIA had narrowed eyes on it. The metaphor of Iran was meant to shake its complacency about Mexico too. CIA analysts, it was suspected, were among those bemused by the successful half-century of the ruling institution in Mexico and thus dangerously blind to the meaning of developments there.

Thus Mexico as Iran: superficially stable, rotting inside; a corrupt ruling institution that was losing or had already lost its grip on politics as well as ignorant of what was going on in its own country — complacency in Mexico City, complacency about Mexico in Washington.

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This was the sand on which the intellectual edifice was built. Events in Mexico suggested that the hypothesis had been given a foundation on rock. Tick them off: the day in August 1982 the Mexicans flew to Washington and New York to say they could not meet their obligations; the grave burden imposed by paying off the interest and principal of the debt owed to foreign banks; the constriction of the economy brought on by the needs to cut back on borrowing and to fight inflation; the shaky confidence of investors in Mexico; the flight of capital abroad; the fall in the price of oil; the excessive corruption of the administration of past-president Lopez Portillo. These are real and serious symptoms of a threat to Mexico's stability.

MEXICO AS AN OBSTACLE

But beyond these worries is a spur to passion in the hearts of the administration. There is Mexico itself and then there is Mexican policy in Central America. Mexico, for its own reasons, has opposed the Reagan administration's policies and actions in both El Salvador and Nicaragua. Mexico's motives are based on Mexican political custom and prejudice rather than on humanitarian concerns for the peoples of Central America. The ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico, the PRI, has an institutional bias against Christian Democrats; so stubborn a bias that two Mexican administrations have favored the Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador rather than to look generously on the struggle for life of the legitimate government of Duarte's Christian Democrats. Mexico does not share our prejudice in favor of democracy and free elections, either. So the Sandinista dictatorship in Nicaragua and the dictatorial rule that would be imposed by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (the FMLN) in El Salvador do not bother Mexicans any more than such dictatorships worry some of this country's noisy opponents to Reagan administration policy in Central America.

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

The pious cite the Contadora process as the way to solve problems in Central America: a magic, cost-free way of bringing peace to Central America without the United States having to dirty its hands. These people do not give the Reagan administration enough credit for the creation of Contadora. When the Mexicans saw that the United States was serious about supporting an elected government in El Salvador and opposing the Sandinista clique, they hastened to call the so-called Contadora countries together to find an alternative to a United States role.

Particularly convenient to a Mexican administration that keeps its radical left firmly in bounds at home is the sop to Cerberus of a policy abroad that favors Marxists and Leninists and has the extra entertaining feature of

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tweaking Uncle Sam's nose. This is given institutional life in the Mexican government by the foreign office, the Secretariat of External Relations. The traditional reaction of that office to initiatives of the United States is to make a face. The Soviets get a favorable hearing if that will irritate the United States and the secretariat's affections for Cuban suggestions are warm, even fawning.

ANOTHER ANECDOTE

Some fifteen or so years ago, it was discovered that an employee of the Secretariat of External Relations was a Soviet agent. Mexican security authorities were more resigned, if not greatly amused, than shocked. They had long since written off the secretariat as a playground of the professional anti-United States element. They were not allowed to touch the secretariat despite the well-known security problems there. Mexican presidents tolerate the fashionable anti-U.S. ploys and the effete left radicalism of the secretariat. Public opposition to the U.S. is an attractive demagogic issue in Mexico. If it is expensive internationally, Mexico does not feel obliged to shoulder that cost.

But the important point is this. Whatever self-indulgent games are played by the External Relations crowd, the president of Mexico cannot be seen publicly to be knuckling under and playing the compliant puppet to United States policy in the Americas: certainly not if the United States is thought to be intervening in the Americas in ways that have wounded Mexico herself in the past. That is less an intelligence judgment than an historical aside. However much we might like Mexican motives to be different we have to accept the reality and to work with it or around it in dealing with Mexico on policy in the Americas.

On one level the Reagan administration shows an honest worry in wanting Mexico to wake up — assuming that it is asleep — to the threat from Nicaragua and from the FMLN in El Salvador. On another level is annoyance, at times rage, that Mexico will not fall into line with the United States — if not to cooperate, then to get out of the way in Central America. This anger should have given way to a merely irritated impatience by now as Mexico has become less openly defiant of the United States and less publicly fervid in supporting the Sandinistas or the FMLN. Yet Mexico is as far as ever from coming out in favor of actions of the United States in Central America and that can be as annoying as ever to those who will not be satisfied until Mexico joins the team.

DOOMSDAY IN MEXICO

Finally, there is the nightmare scenario and here we get back to Mexico itself. In this analysis, developments in Central America are a mere prelude.

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The real Soviet-Cuban target is Mexico itself. (As well as anecdotes there are catch phrases. One member of the administration gazed at a map of Mexico and, turning toward tiny Belize on Mexico's eastern frontier, expressed a not-unjustified concern for the security of that border by pronouncing this elegant metaphor: "Belize: a dagger pointed at the heart of El Dorado.") Thus, there is the thesis that Mexico may fall as a final and planned result of a Soviet-Cuban offensive in Central America. And, if it is not believed by all those who say it, the idea is a useful argument for attracting support for U.S. policy in Central America. Those who do not accept this grave view are complacently confident of the strength of Mexico, its institutions, and its people. Furthermore, these same people do not comprehend Soviet strategy in the Americas. This administration is not going to sit still for another Iran with hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of refugees streaming into this country, a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship on our southern border, and the United States deprived of still another source of oil.

This doomsday view of Mexico led to differences of opinion between those in the administration who held it and the professional, career people in the places that mattered, State and the CIA, in particular. State is important particularly because it stands for, and through its professionals administers the continuity of United States foreign policy. If the professionals at State did not agree with this view — as they did not — they should go to sit on the sidelines while others take care of major United States interests in Mexico. But, even should that work out, the concept of Mexico as Iran would be still only an opinion, a hypothesis that could itself be challenged. Legitimacy of the doctrine would require its endorsement by the intelligence community. If the intelligence community were to say that the concept was valid then it would be official doctrine. Thus, those in the Reagan administration espousing this received or inspired opinion of Mexico did their best to convince the professionals of the validity of the hypothesis of Mexico-as-Iran so that Mexico-as-Iran would become the official and approved doctrinal way of looking at Mexico.

THE PROS VERSUS THE AMATEURS

Conflict arose because of the suspicion of doctrine in the permanent bureaucracy. Intelligence officers, by training and by experience, are suspicious of attempts to make the world fit someone's intellectual mold — whether that of the Marxists or of bumptious social scientists. So also does experience make skeptical the practitioners of foreign affairs.

The resulting confrontation might be described as classic. Here was the new administration excited about deterioration in Mexico and here was the immovable bureaucracy, set in its ways, and impervious to arguments that

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would cause it to change its sleepily comfortable view of the Mexican establishment as immortal. How do you get the so-called experts, arrogantly patronizing of your new idea and resenting the newcomers on their preserve, to consider this view or even to look at unwelcome evidence? As far as the new team could see, at State and in the multitude of other departments and agencies dealing with Mexico, inertia was the rule. They were dealing with Mexico in the same way they had over the years and the Mexicans got away with murder.

For the professionals, a new group of opinionated amateurs was in town. The Carter people had distorted foreign affairs and offended friends and allies whose cooperation the United States needed with their overriding obsession with the single issue of human rights. Now, in the case of Mexico, a half-baked theory had taken on the authority of gospel. Intelligence people were told to ignore the Mexico they knew and to believe in an imaginary one. And if this imaginary Mexico were to be substituted for the real one, it meant changes in policy toward Mexico, although it was not clear how the administration expected these changes to come about.

In such a situation, only slightly caricatured above, opposing sides develop. With Mexico, there were more than two sides, because a number of professionals as well as administration people could see that evidence of imminent collapse in Mexico was lacking but, on the other hand, could see the need for being ready to revise past opinions of Mexican stability should the situation deteriorate.

THE EVIDENCE

Had the Mexico-as-Iran faction not laid siege to the entrenched professionals, reaching a clear or agreed appreciation of Mexico would have been difficult. Some thought there was not enough information from the United States Embassy in Mexico City, for instance. Some people never get enough information, of course, to make up their minds. Some never get enough of what they want to hear. Others are happier listening to their inner voices, cultivating their opinions of the great world, unhampered by reporting from abroad.

No amount of information can put an end to controversy when there is deep disagreement about the nature of reality among interested parties. An objective observer, not himself a party to the dispute, might have suggested to the quarreling parties that they temporarily tolerate the existence of other views until the evidence was better. That advice would be distasteful to the true believer, for it would mean compromising his truth with error.

What aggravated the difficulty of trying to describe Mexico was the power of the anecdotes and the persistent allegations of eventual collapse in Mexico

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— however collapse would be defined by different people. The allegations were backed by rumors, by the anecdotes themselves, as well as by the selective use of information. Information as torn apart to be made into ammunition that would be fired at the other side while digging one's trenches deeper. Obviously, the question of Mexico or the questions about Mexico were not being satisfactorily answered. With less zeal, this might have led to a suspension of emergent interest in the question because the truth of the information available could not be agreed on. Rather, because of zeal, an expensive redundancy in both collection of information and the analysis of it was the result.

HOSTILE INTERROGATION OF THE SUBJECT

This redundancy was useful in one of its manifestations but was almost a parody of intelligence work in another. Because of the importance given the allegations about Mexico, resources were taken from other important work in an effort to dig up evidence to support the shaky allegations. These allegations — as distinct from evidence — questioned the effectiveness or even the existence of the traditional political and cultural props to stability in Mexico. They ranged the spectrum of Mexican society, the examples following being purposely stated in general terms: the weakness or the actual demise of the political system, leaked rumors of significant corruption in the new Mexican administration, the power of the right opposition, the subversive work of the radical left, the clandestine influence in Mexico of Soviets and Cubans, restless and subversive squatters in the cities, sullen and Marxist students, a desperate middle class withdrawing its support from the system, radical labor unions, angry campesinos. And so on: shadows in the dark, distant lightning, far-off thunder.

Specifically, it was alleged that there was unrest among the campesinos in the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. A bowdlerized version of a discussion of that would go something like this:

Comment on the allegation: There is always unrest among the campesinos in Oaxaca and Guerrero.

Riposte: (Complacency!) This time it's different. The central government is unaware of it or if they know about it they can't control it. Also, the Cubans (or the Soviets) are in there organizing the campesinos.

Query: Gosh! Where did you hear that? We've seen no such report.

Answer: Never mind. I have my own private information sources. That you have not seen such a report merely supports my previous remarks about the bankrupt nature of our intelligence-gathering system in Mexico.

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As a consequence of such a standoff a query would go out to the collectors or be repeated if it had gone out before. The burden of confirming the truth of an unfounded allegation was on the collector: his failure to do so only showed again that he was looking in the wrong place, talking to the wrong people — out of touch. There was no burden of proof, on the other hand, on (if you will excuse the term) the allegator.

Trying to confirm the bad report and thus the false hypothesis by sending out little parties to unearth information is expensive and in this instance was unrewarding. So was the charging of people quite unprepared by training or past mission to report on political affairs, another device that developed from the dispute over Mexico.

There seemed to be a tactic at work here that was not confined to the Mexican question. At the time that pot was boiling away, a study of a sensitive and important question concerning Cuba was proposed. An analyst who had been working on Cuba for some time pointed out that no information had come in to justify changes in previous answers to the question. His diagnosis was cynical: the administration, by forcing the analysts once more to address the question, hoped that this time they would blurt out the answer the administration wanted — the answer that the administration suspected the analysts to be withholding deliberately.

An interrogator, knowing the answer he wants, asks his prisoner the same question over and over again, waiting for him to break and come up with what is needed.

BUT DID THE SYSTEM WORK?

Two different bodies in the intelligence community were taking a hard look at Mexico. A national intelligence estimate was being written at the direction of the Director of Central Intelligence. While that was underway, a task force of talented people was commissioned to seek answers to many of the questions the estimate was addressing.* It made sense to pursue an independent judgment on such an important question as the outlook for Mexico. But neither the national intelligence estimate nor the final report of the task force satisfied those who felt they had all the answers about Mexico. The system worked; that is, the intelligence system did not disgorge the dogmatic, doctrinal conclusion about Mexico's future that it had been invited to espouse. If it had — the evidence being both incomplete and subject to various interpretations — the system would have been perverted.

*"We organize special task forces of agency experts and outside specialists to do competitive analysis and to ensure we are examining all aspects of key problems." Robert M. Gates in an article entitled "Is the CIA's Analysis Any Good?" in *The Washington Post* of 12 December 1984.

SO WHAT?

A newspaperman who had made his name as an investigative reporter remarked, on getting a whiff of this,* that he would have thought the differences over Mexico significant had it been the contrary case; that is, had the administration been complacent and trying to prevent the intelligence community from sounding the klaxon about troubles in Mexico.

An investigative reporter sniffs about for scandal, and he does not find it here. In a broad political sense his observation is correct. The intelligence officer must take a narrower view. Aside from the seriousness or the triviality of the result, attempts to persuade the intelligence community to accept on faith, rather than evidence, doctrinal views of the world are repugnant. The reason for espousing the narrow view — if indeed we agree that it is narrow — is that no one else, not the investigative reporter, not the politician, can be counted on to defend the integrity of the intelligence system. And if intelligence officers are not jealous of the independence of the intelligence process who then will stand up for it?

USING INTELLIGENCE TO PUSH A POLICY

During this dispute over Mexico one could see why people in the administration got upset with the intelligence community. Intelligence didn't show what they were being told by the people from Texas and California, whom they knew and trusted. Yet that does not satisfactorily explain the persistence with which the doomsday hypothesis was pushed. Here I must speculate.

During this time an administration official suggested punishing Mexico for obstructing us in Central America. When this essay was repulsed he trotted out the alternative of sending a signal, as it were, of what we could do to make Mexico suffer, should she continue obdurate. Wiser heads saw that the interest of the United States lay in helping Mexico weather the storm, not in handicapping her further. Further, punishing Mexico could hardly be done quietly and the attempt would only justify the worst fears of xenophobic Mexicans without getting the Mexican government to knuckle under. The idea was wrongheaded for another reason: the problems in Central America are not caused by Mexico. It is one thing to find the Mexicans annoying in their self-righteous preaching at us about Central America while themselves favoring tinpot dictatorships. It is something else to lash out at Mexico to relieve our own anger, indulging in a tantrum unworthy of a great power.

*This was a comment made in a conversation with the author.

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The Mexican government still disagrees with United States policy but is not blatantly supporting the Sandinistas and the FMLN as it was earlier. Possibly this has led the administration to put aside the dispute. One would like to think that neither the intelligence community nor the foreign service are any longer being chivvied to accept doctrinal views or to carry out wrongheaded policies toward Mexico.

HOW DOES IT HAPPEN?

The observations here do not pretend to imply that this typifies the administration's approach to every question posed in international affairs. It is one view of the case of Mexico. The extent to which doctrinal approaches to other questions are smothering information and alternative views can be judged best by those working daily with information from all sources on these other questions.

Certain conditions may bring on the outbreak of the malady that affects considerations of Mexico. One condition develops from uncertainty about an important question. When uncertainty is complicated by inability to agree on elemental questions of fact, the doctrinal chasm looms. When the motives of opponents are questioned, facts take on darker shades. When the question is of keen domestic interest ("political," as it were), the threat from polemic distortion is high.

WHAT IS TRUTH?

The skepticism of the intelligence officer and the pragmatism of the career foreign service officer (both of them suspicious of those who are sure about what must be uncertain) do not shine in comparison with the cockiness of the doctrinaire. The qualities of skepticism and pragmatism should not be elevated to the status of unfailingly reliable principles. But they are sorely needed when doctrinaires try to control the information used to decide crucial questions.

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